

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature

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UNDER COMPULSION

By ALBERT WILLIAM STONE

"I'LL TELL YOU what's the trouble with me," said George Penman as he turned from the typewriter which he had been idly regarding for the past half-hour. "When I used to write salable stories, I wrote them under a certain pressure."

"You used to sell them," his wife replied. "At least, a good part of them. Now—well, how long is it since you have mailed out a new story to the magazines?"

"A good many weeks," acknowledged George. "That's what I'm saying. I could turn out stuff when I wrote under pressure; but now that I've got a pretty fair income from the office and don't have to depend on the sale of stories, I've grown more exacting. It's harder to evolve ideas that satisfy me."

"Don't you think," asked Helen timidly, "that you'd write better stuff if you would only stick to your stories till they were finished?"

"Perhaps you're right," George admitted with a sigh. "If something would happen to make me get right down to it, as I used to, I believe I'd begin selling again. I don't seem able to stick to a yarn unless I feel a strong incentive."

"Incentive! With the magazine that bought your series of outdoor yarns back in 1917 simply begging you to send some new stuff!"

"Well," he conceded, "perhaps incentive isn't the word. It might be better to say that I need somebody to stand over me with a club—somebody with the authority to keep me at the job. It's almost a cinch that if I wrote and finished the stories I could sell them."

Helen laughed. "Don't be absurd," she said. "You know perfectly well that nobody is going to club you into writing a story."

He stared at her speculatively. "You might do it," he said. "Especially if you were a man and about twice as big as you are. For instance, if I knew that I had to write a story tonight or pay a

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heavy penalty, I could do it. It's in me, but—I don't seem able to bring it out."

Helen was silent and thoughtful. Presently she announced that she was going to bed. But before doing so, she tiptoed into the hall and took down the telephone receiver.

Her husband concentrated his brows and the typewriter began to click.

THE clicking continued for more than an hour. Then it ceased and George looked at his watch.

"Bum start," he remarked to himself. "Can't get into the spirit of it, as usual. Guess I'll knock off for the night and finish some other time—when I'm more in the mood. Anyway, I——"

He paused, staring.

In a corner of the room, beside one of the windows, a man was standing. With a start, George Penman noted that he was big and heavy-set, and that over the upper part of his face he wore a black mask. The mouth under the edge of the mask was compressed into a thin line and had a wicked look. Altogether, the visitor presented a sinister appearance.

"Who are you?" demanded the writer, "and how did you get in here?"

With another start, he noticed that the man held in his right hand an ugly-looking automatic revolver.

"Through th' winder," the visitor explained. "Keep right on wit' yer writin'."

George Penman began to tremble—with excitement, he afterward insisted.

"See here!" he began—"if you don't make yourself scarce inside of a minute——"

"Keep yer trap shut!"

The automatic sprang into position. George found himself staring into a hole of incredibly large diameter, and with a black center whose depths suggested grim possibilities.

"Get back to yer writin' an' be quick about it!" the interloper growled. "Th' bulls is after me an' I'm gonna hide in here till the coast is clear. So keep on poundin'. They won't bother this apartment 's long as they hear someone workin'."

"But my wife!" choked George Penman. "If she——"

"Never mind yer wife. She ain't gonna git hurt—not onless she comes in here to find out why you ain't workin'. I can't take no chances on her runnin' to the telephone, callin' the cops—see?"

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THE muzzle of the automatic seemed as large as ever. With a wrench, George focused his attention on the sheet of paper in the machine before him. The thug's reasoning was correct. As long as George continued to write, his wife would refrain from disturbing him, for it was an unwritten law in his household that when he had an inspiration he must not be interrupted for anything short of a fire.

To save his wife, and possibly his own skin, George would obey the ruffian. Mechanically he clicked out the completion of a sentence. The burglar grunted in approval.

"That's the ticket," he growled. "Keep it up, old-timer, an' we'll all wear di'monds."

And George Penman "kept it up." Gropingly, he managed to pick up the thread of the plot where he had dropped it, and to weave with zest, if not skill. It happened that he was writing a "crime" story. He was struck with the analogy between fact and fiction, and smiled grimly. With a housebreaker in the room and a cruel-looking gun trained on his head, he had no lack of "incentive." Presently his fingers were flying over the keys. George Penman actually had become absorbed.

Once he looked up abstractedly. The man with the mask was still there, and so was the gun. George resumed his typewriting with all his old-time energy.

WHEN he had reached the end of the tale, George's intense concentration had brought moisture to his brow. As he leaned back in his chair, he became conscious of a dull pain between his shoulders. It was the kind of pain he used to feel when he had ground out a nightly grist of "salable stuff." A thrill of exultation came over him. And then he remembered the man with the gun.

Slowly he swung round in his chair. The fellow had disappeared!

George Penman rubbed his eyes. The visit of the masked man suddenly seemed like a dream. Had he really been there at all? It was only after George had crossed the room and picked up a discarded mask from the floor that he felt sure he had not been dreaming.

The mask was made of a fine grade of silk. He stared intently at it, then turned slowly to the manuscript sheets that lay untidily on his desk. Suddenly he laughed.

"What a chump I am!" he exclaimed. "Fell for it like a kid. Must have been so absorbed in my work that I couldn't get my think-tank to going properly."

He opened the door and entered the short hall that led to his sleeping apartment. The more he reflected upon it, the more apparent it became that he had been the victim of a hoax.

HIS wife roused at his entrance. "Aren't you in bed yet?" she demanded, with sleepy petulance.

George chuckled. "You're a good actress," he acknowledged. "I'll have to hand it to you, Helen. You certainly put one over on me."

"What do you mean?"

"Why——" and George explained in detail what had occurred. "And it wasn't till after he had gone that I tumbled," he said in conclusion.

"I see," said Helen, now thoroughly awake. "It appears, then, that you kept on writing?"

"Yes."

"You finished the story?"

"I did."

"And it's fairly good?"

"I think so," he owned modestly.

Helen sat on the edge of the bed and rocked back and forth in laughter.

"It's funny!" she said, as soon as she could control her voice. "The truth is, I *did* have something of the sort in mind; I even went so far as to telephone for my brother Sam, but he had an engagement and couldn't come out. Anyway, you've proved your point."

"My point?"

"Yes—you said all you needed was somebody to stand over you with a club and make you write—that it was in you, if only it could be made to come out."

"By Jove, that's so!"

"I suppose," added Helen, "this means that I must hire a thug whose sole business it will be to keep you at work."

"Not much, it doesn't," said her husband. "If someone else can make me work, I'm going to prove that I can be just as severe a taskmaster on my own account. Each night when I sit down at my typewriter, I'm going to require the completion of so much

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work—and insist that any story well begun must be finished. As a penalty for failure—well, I won't go to bed till I've done the stint. You're a witness to the vow."

"If you fail to keep your word, you'll never hear the last of it," said Helen promptly.

George looked apprehensive. "Something tells me," he observed, "that I've put my foot in it. Confound that burglar, and——"

"Yes?" prompted his wife, as he hesitated.

"And bless him," said George. "Long may he elude the police."

(EDITOR'S NOTE.—The Student-Writer is not a fiction magazine, but when a snappily written short-story comes to hand that points as good a moral for writers as "Under Compulsion," that story is going to be accepted, at the best rates the editor can afford, and published. Such stories are wanted, not only because they relieve the monotony of formal articles on the problems of literary workers, but because they offer food for thought and solve problems that frequently beset writers.)

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MORE CRITICAL FRAGMENTS

Fragment 18.

ONE OF the strongest aids for the holding of interest which lie at the command of the fiction-writer is the single viewpoint. By adhering to it, you eliminate most of the elements that make for confusion and obscurity in the narration. As readers, we unconsciously assume the identity of the character from whose viewpoint the incidents are related. We live the life of that character. His experiences, thoughts, and emotions become ours. If part of the story is told from the point of view of one character and part from that of another, this unity of impression is lost. How can we sympathize wholly with Helen's suspicions of Jack if we have been able to look into his mind and ascertain that his motives are honest?

Clarity results from the single viewpoint. As each development is unfolded for the benefit of the viewpoint character it is also unfolded for the reader. If a mystery is to be maintained, it cannot consistently be done by the withholding of facts known only to one character while other facts known only to that character are revealed. Should this be attempted, the reader will feel that the mystification is accomplished by the author—not that the events in themselves were mystifying.

To make this clearer: Suppose that Helen knows something that no other character in the story knows—that certain jewels were stolen by a man named Jones. Now, it will not do for you to look into her mind and thereby reveal that the jewels were stolen, while you make a mystery of the identity of the man who stole them. It must be all or nothing. If you want to keep dark the identity of the man who stole the jewels, tell the story from the point of view of some character who does not know who stole them.

Fragment 19.

IT MUST be admitted that the odds against those who would win open fame are great indeed. Yet this may be viewed as encouraging rather than discouraging. Writers who have a lurking feeling that luck, not hard work, is at the bottom of success, will do well to consider the histories of those who have "arrived." They will find that in most instances success was the reward of struggles against overwhelming odds and disappointments. The man who wins is the man who never takes time to think that he is down and out, but who continues to strive on, regardless of the result that may seem to follow his efforts.

Maurice Maeterlinck, the now famous Belgian playwright and essayist, whose "Blue Bird," and "Tyltyl," the sequel to the former, have won him wide recognition and admiration, was such a

failure at first that he offered his manuscripts free just to get them into print, but no publisher bit on his generous bait. Little or no attention was paid to his first volume of poems, and his first play met a none better fate.

Anthony Paul Kelly, the successful scenario and play writer, came near starving to death in Los Angeles when he first arrived there, and offered a bored restaurant proprietor his services as a dishwasher for a meal, but was refused. His survival no doubt is due to the fact that in the very next mail after his dishwashing application was refused a check for \$50 arrived from the Vitagraph Film Co. for one of his scenarios written by candlelight on a soap-box in an abandoned cattle-shed outside of the city where he had made his sleeping quarters.

That O. Henry attained such a mastery of words was attributed by him to the fact that he was jailed for six or more weeks on pleading guilty to dodging board and meal bills at a boarding house when he became penniless. A dictionary was given him in his cell to amuse himself with. "It was pretty broken up, and dull reading," the short-story celebrity is known to have said afterward.

Mark Twain became so disappointed with his work at one time that he threw a pile of his scripts into the wastebasket, and then in order to earn a living went West, took up shovel and pick, and played the part of a miner.

It is through a mere piece of luck coming in the nick of time that we have Edgar Allan Poe in memory today. In the hour of utter failure and distress which hindered him from his work till he resolved to quit then and there, a check for ten dollars arrived from an editor for his poem, "The Raven." It was what gave him courage to dip his quill into the ink again and continue to write. His after works of prose proved more successful.

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